

Surrender Dorothy

Unity Church
March 6th, 2011

The image is indelibly etched into our minds. The witch of the west in all her cackling green glory sweeping back and forth across the sky as the smoke trailing from her broomstick spells out in loopy, cursive script the words, "surrender Dorothy." I don't know about you but when someone says the word surrender my quirky mind first answers "Dorothy" and then moves on to "no I most certainly will not surrender. "

As Gerald May reminds us "Surrender is the giving of one's personal will to another...surrender is dangerous whenever there is any known, definable cause, group, person, or other substantive and limited entity that is used as an object for surrender." In the interest of fostering spiritual maturity May is struggling to make a distinction between the restorative experience of spiritual surrender and the very real dangers involved in with giving over one's will to anything less than the "unknowable Mystery behind the images of God."

At face value the very notion of spiritual surrender seems like an echo of a time when religion served primarily as in instrument of social control. The notion reeks of patriarchy and feudalism. I once tried to convince my father of the efficacy of spiritual surrender. He would have none of it. Surrender, he said, paves the way for fascism, erodes the will and makes human beings far more susceptible to political manipulation. Well, never mind.

Elie Weisel is right. The story of the 20th century can only be read by the light of burning children. My father's attitude reflects the experience of countless thoughtful men and women of his generation who saw the newsreels of the Nazi rallies as tens of thousands surrendered to their patriotic frenzy and ushered in the holocaust. It's no wonder that they're wary.

The problem is that in response to their completely understandable fear of mind-control previous generations of religious liberals cut themselves off from the sustaining power that spiritual surrender can provide. This church and others like it have enshrined that fear by removing both the concept and practice of surrender from our spiritual vocabulary. But surrender or submission is an essential aspect of effective spiritual practice. Spiritual maturity requires that we come to understand and to experience that there is a power far beyond our own, a power on which we have no choice but to rely. The only way to come to understand it is to experience it. Though our hesitance and suspicion of surrender is well founded we hunger for the replenishment and strengthening of faith that only surrender can bring.

The problem is there are no guarantees. I wish that I could promise you that God is good. I wish I could assure you that that a benevolent being will catch you as you fall. But such

assurances, though comforting, lead to an idolatry, which undermines both spiritual integrity and depth. How many of us here have turned away from God because we just can't fathom that God, whom we've been told is love, can allow evil to prosper. Seventeenth century Jesuit theologian Francois de Fenelon prays "teach me to adore all thy purposes without knowing them." I'd sooner let that old God go and learn to live in an inexplicable, random universe among those who know God doesn't care and realize that's why we have to.

The fact that there are no guarantees, the fact that sometimes things just don't work out makes us reticent to trust those who suggest that we surrender into faith. Faith in what, we ask? Faith in an utterly unpredictable, completely unreliable God? Faith in the man behind the curtain who pretends to be the wise and powerful wizard of Oz? No way. No how. There is, I've found, a kind of faith based not upon belief in things unseen but found instead in life's resilience even in the face of evil, even in the face of death.

Many of you know that I was quite ill this past December. I had pneumonia. Now, I've led a fortunate life. I hadn't been so sick since childhood. At first I tried to tough it out. But when the fever spiked and the pain in my chest became debilitating I finally had to stop. Reflecting on the experience I wrote:

"I don't tend to get sick. It must be good genes. I assure you it's not ample exercise and wise dietary decisions. But the truth is both Janne and I are blessed with strong constitutions and an almost irrepressible work ethic. So I find it strange to be writing this piece on day 9 of debilitating illness. It is, I learned yesterday, after almost five days in bed with a hacking cough and spiking fever, when I finally decided I was sick enough to visit my doctor, "just a touch of pneumonia." But for those of us who don't tend to get sick a touch of pneumonia is a direct encounter with mortality. I'll be fine in a few days. And I've learned a couple of important lessons that I want to share with you.

Did you know that illness is not necessarily self-indulgence? You may not know this but I can be a very driven, highly ambitious person. Being sick has knocked me for a loop and given me a new respect for those for whom just making it through the day is a significant accomplishment. Sometimes a smack across the snoot can be a real wake up call. It is just plain arrogant to ignore the impact of illness. Compassion is not just a great big word for good old fashioned kindness. Compassion comes with an abiding awareness of true connection. It comes with the conviction that "there but for the grace of God go I."

The other big lesson is one I have to learn over and over again. George Harrison says it so well:

*"We were talking-about the space between us all
And the people-who hide themselves behind a wall of illusion...When you've seen beyond
yourself-then you may find, peace of mind, is waiting there-
And the time will come when you see we're all one, and life flows on within you and
without you.*

In the rush and tumble of my life I forget that I am one among many. In my illness I've

had to let it all go. Meetings, which seemed essential, counseling appointments for which only I would do, even a visit to treasured colleagues, all of it, cancelled. And on top of that we had a blizzard, which caused us to cancel church services. In thirty-five years of ministry Janne and I had never cancelled services until that week. And you what? Life goes on; life flows on within you and without you. It's not about me. It never has been. How lovely to learn that lesson again here among you."

Much as I love the church, integral as I imagine I am to its well being, the church thrived in my absence. In my considerably weakened state a sweet and quiet Christmas came and went. It was all I could do to bow and smile and to make it through. I saved what little voice I had for prayer and for the few essential carols I just had to make it through that bleak mid-winter.

I can't say I found God when I realized how sick I was and finally surrendered. But I did touch some new depth of faith when I let go and trusted you to carry on. I'm not talking about my confidence in this community or in your trustworthy, talented staff. I'm trying to describe a deeper confidence not in you per se, not based upon evidence, but instead a confidence that only comes with letting go. I'm hoping to find some strong enough way to testify to my own inner life that my testimony might encourage you to learn to let go in like ways, to cultivate both prayer and praise as practices that will, I promise you, inspire and sustain the faith we need to lead us on to the light.

Swiss philosopher and educator, Jean Piaget asserts that true maturity begins when we are able to "un-center ourselves on ourselves." Each year as the ninth graders in our coming-of-age class prepare to share their theological statements with the congregation they meet with Janne and me. We circle around in small groups. We ask them about their spiritual practices, their ability to be intimate in small groups and what gifts they think they wish to cultivate with which to bless the world. And then we help them to consider the five essential questions of traditional systematic theology. What is the nature of God? What does it mean to be human? How do we know the God within? Why do we live in community? And, what does that fact of death have to do with how we live our lives? The hardest one for most of them to grapple with is how do we know the God within? How can those of us who've left God the Father far behind admit to ourselves, let alone to others, that there are fleeting moments when something inside us lets go, fleeting moments when we're "neither here nor there, a hurry through which known and strange things pass...and catch the heart off guard and blow it open."

"We don't get it," they say. Do you play sports I ask them, or music? Have you ever played so well, have you ever been so caught up in the game, in such profound connection with your teammates or with the choir or the orchestra or band that you lost track of where you ended and the motion or the music began? Or in church, have you ever settled so deeply into silence that you could feel your heart and everyone else's heart beating together? And they get it. There is something inside us, some point of connection, some still point, some receiver, some spark of God that helps us to surrender into faith.

We live in the tension between self-consciousness and the experience of the Holy. Surrender is the path that leads between the two. The purpose of surrender is to help us grow beyond the bondage of our self-absorption so that we might recognize and yes, remember we are not alone and learn to live our lives in service to a larger love. This is the purpose of the church. This is the source of all transforming faith. This is the work of the heart. This is the heart of the work. We really have no choice you know. Life is, at best, a long slow letting go. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. This day, yes, and every day. Amen and blessed be.

Readings for March 6th, 2011

St. Kevin and the Blackbird

And then there was St. Kevin and the blackbird.
The saint is kneeling, arms stretched out, inside
His cell, but the cell is narrow, so

One turned-up palm is out the window, stiff
As a crossbeam, when a blackbird lands
And lays in it and settles down to nest.

Kevin feels the warm eggs, the small breast, the tucked
Neat head and claws and, finding himself linked
Into the network of eternal life,

Is moved to pit: now he must hold his hand
Like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks
Until the young are hatched and fledged and flown.

*

And since the whole thing is imagined anyhow,
Imagine being Kevin. Which is he?
Self-forgetful or in agony all the time

From the neck on out down through his hurting forearms?
Are his fingers sleeping? Does he still feel his knees?
Or has the shut-eyed blank of underearth

Crept up through him? Is there distance in his head?
Alone and mirrored clear in love's deep river,
'To labour and not to seek reward,' he prays,

A prayer his body makes entirely
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird
And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name.

from Will and Spirit Gerald May:

Surrender is the giving of one's personal will to another. . We may conclude from this that acts of legitimate spiritual surrender must be conscious, intentional, and freely chosen, and that one must be willing to accept responsibility for the acts of surrender. True surrender cannot be seen as automatic, reflexive, unintended, or in any way "out of control." . . . One must not only make the choice to surrender consciously, intentionally, and with acceptance of responsibility for that choice, but one must also be willing to accept responsibility for any and all consequences of that choice. I would posit that surrender is dangerous whenever there is any known, definable cause, group, person, or other substantive and limited entity that is used as an object for surrender. . . . Any objectified image of God must make the surrender into an objectified image as well. It is only when one can surrender to the ultimately unknowable Mystery behind the images of God that the act of surrendering can result in less self-definition rather than more. . The direct personal experience of Mystery is not unlike standing in a warm summer rain, feeling the drops on your face, smelling its freshness, being in it so intimately that you never think to call it "rain." There is sufficient self-definition here to be fully appreciative and even awe-struck by the magnificence of what is given, but not enough to cause one to have to label, judge, or manipulate the experience in any way. Since such states border on the unitive, they probably constitute the deepest possible kind of experience of God.

Postscript

And some time make the time to drive out west
Into County Calre, along the Flaggy Shore,
In September or October, when the wind
And the light are working off each other
So that the ocean on one side is wild
With foam and glitter, and inland among stones
The surface of a slate-grey lake is lit
By the earthed lightning of a flock of swans,
Their feathers roughed and ruffling, white on white,
Their fully grown headstrong-looking heads
Tucked or cresting or busy underwater.
Useless to think you'll park and capture it
More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there,
A hurry through which known and strange things pass
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.

Seamus Heaney